

VOICES OF AMERICA

A CHASE FOR THE ELUSIVE KAL STORY

■ Three years after the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by Soviet gunners—with loss of all 269 aboard—the question persists: Did it simply stray over the Soviet Union because of human error or was it there to spy?

Books now flowing into the stores point in both directions. By mid-September, two works by respected writers will have been published this year, and a third could be out by early 1987.

The latest is from Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Seymour Hersh, who makes the case in *The Target Is Destroyed* that human error was most likely responsible for KAL 007's fatal course in the predawn gloom of Sept. 1, 1983. In the other books—the earlier *Shootdown* by R. W. Johnson, and a forthcoming, yet untitled work by *Nation* magazine author David Pearson—the finger points unhesitatingly toward a U.S. espionage conspiracy.

Hersh's book, to be published by Random House and excerpted in the September issue of the *Atlantic*, has attracted most attention, both because of his credentials as an investigator of Washington's secrets and because of CIA Director William Casey's concerns about his revelations. In his research, Hersh plumbed in great detail the intimate workings of super-secret United States electronic intelligence gathering in East Asia.

But after two years of seeking the tragedy's cause, Hersh concludes that a spy plot played no role in the episode. Rather, he says, "the destruction of Flight 007 had its beginnings not in international intrigue but in ordinary human failings." The human error, says Hersh, was on both sides—that of the plane's crew members, who appear to have made a series of navigational and other mistakes, and that of the Soviets, who apparently mistook the airliner for one of the U.S. spy planes that frequently probe the region.

The journalist, a former investigative reporter for the *New York Times*, says America's National Security Agency intercepted Soviet communications showing that the Soviet command was convinced that the jet was, in fact, a U.S. military intelligence plane. Adding to this impression was the plane's course—similar in most respects to those flown by U.S. spy planes, one of which the Soviets had tracked in the same area just before they detected Flight 007.

But the same telltale communications intercepts, Hersh discovered, were not actually analyzed and understood until more than 4 hours after the incident. This disclosure would explain heated charges by President Reagan that Moscow had brutally, and with cold calculation, shot down what it had plainly identified as a civilian jet. Hersh chides the administration for not revealing the confusion of the Sovi-

What doomed the Korean jet by sending it off course—human error or U.S. spying? Three new books tackle the issue

ets, even though top officials had become aware of what had happened in the days after the attack. Instead, American officials pursued a propaganda coup as already chilly superpower relations plummeted to low ebb.

On the core question from which all others flow—why KAL 007 was so far off course—Hersh adds details that reinforce the explanation offered by Harold Ewing, a veteran American pilot. Ewing, who regularly flew the Alaska-Far East route that should have been followed by KAL 007, studied all the data gathered by the International Civil Aviation Organization, which investigated how the flight turned into a disaster. He then tested various types of conceivable pilot error on computers and also tested the possibility that state-of-the-art navigational equipment used on the KAL jet may have been misprogramed. Ewing's findings: The electronic guiding gadgetry was far from fool-proof and, if fed incorrect information by technicians, may well have helped to lead the plane far off course.

In fact, writes Hersh, programming mistakes were not unknown to KAL's management before the attack. Because of three earlier instances, the airline had actually placed pilots on notice that there would be severe sanctions if future incidents occurred. When the airliner was downed, it was 350 miles off course, near Sakhalin Island in the Sea of Japan.

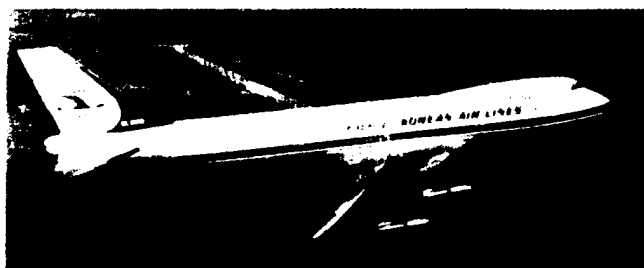
Thirst for intelligence

Unlike Hersh, the other authors suggest variations on the spy-plot theme. They discount pilot error, noting the computer safeguards against it, and stress America's insatiable demand for current intelligence about its Soviet rival. Johnson's *Shootdown*, published by Viking-Penguin, Inc., in June, argues that Reagan administration hard-liners collaborated with willing Koreans to dispatch the air-

liner not on an overt spy mission, but a "passive probe." The mission, Johnson argues, was to activate Soviet radar and surveillance devices in a way that would permit the United States to better understand how they work. A U.S. conspiracy also appears to be the basic premise of Pearson's forthcoming book, to be published by Summit.

The quest to solve the KAL 007 puzzle is fast becoming a lucrative cottage industry for authors, and the many missing pieces of the puzzle guarantee more books to come. Despite all that has been written so far, however, no one—not Hersh, not Johnson, not Pearson—has yet conclusively proved why the aircraft was where it was when the Soviet gunners opened fire. It could remain one of history's unanswered questions.

by Robert A. Manning



The 1983 downing of the airliner shocked the world

